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BP and NIPSCO Lockouts

How to Defend the USW

WV Photo

Locked-out USW Local 7-1 members in front of IBT van at April 12 BP picket. USW needs IBT and other unions to build strong pickets and stop scabs.

The USW is under full-scale attack in Northwest Indiana. First, on March 19, Local 7-1 was locked out at the BP (British Petroleum) oil refinery in Whiting. Two weeks later, Locals 12775 and 13796 were locked out at NIPSCO. Credible rumors are circulating that Locals 1014 and 1066 steel mill workers in Gary are next. The bosses are executing a plan to crush the union. At BP, they have the chainsaw out, to cut over 100 jobs, slash base pay for nearly all job classifications and shred seniority rights. USW members on the picket lines are committed to the union's defense, but success is going to take an equally organized and united stand. In isolation, each local is prone to falling like dominoes.

BP has been methodically plotting for months—bringing in a union-busting executive from Texas, replacing union jobs with outside contractors, lining up scabs from around the country. ***This is a declaration of war!*** But the USW leadership is acting like the situation is just a simple misunderstanding. They plead with the company to see reason, and to demonstrate their reasonableness they offer to send the union membership back to work while talks continue. But attempting to reason with these fat cats will get you as far as a solar panel on a cloudy day. It is a line of defense that is no defense at all.

The coordinated offensive against the USW is no accident. This country's ruling class is looking to overhaul the economy for its gain alone, and steel and energy production are at the center of that effort. BP and NIPSCO are riding high on Trump's fossil fuel frenzy, and they are taking a cue from his seizure of Venezuelan oil, launching of war in the Middle East and attacks on the union rights of federal workers. BP helped usher in U.S. domination of Iran in the 1950s

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Spartacist League/U.S., section of the International Communist League (Fourth Internationalist)
Box 1377 GPO, New York, NY 10116 • (212) 732-7860 • iclfi.org • vanguard@tiac.net • @WorkersVanguard

Chicago: (312) 563-0441
chicagospartacist@sbcglobal.net

Los Angeles: (213) 380-8239
slsycla@sbcglobal.net

New York: (212) 267-1025
nysl@tiac.net

Oakland: (510) 839-0851
slbayarea@fastmail.net

and is now following in the footsteps of the U.S. rulers' renewed aggression against that country. Namely, the oil giant has redoubled its own aggression against the USW. To prevent a major union defeat, it is going to take a lot more than the union leaders' pleas for the company to demonstrate "good faith" and their welcoming of bosses' politicians, like Governor Mike Braun, on the picket lines. ***Coordinated labor action to challenge BP head-on is a must.***

Refusing to budge on safety is a great place to start. BP has a long and deadly history of ignoring warning signs and outright safety hazards in the pursuit of profits. Just ask any oil worker about Texas City, Prudhoe Bay, Deep Water Horizon or the explosion in Whiting itself. Dozens of lives lost, hundreds of thousands of oil barrels spilled into coastal waters and untold damage to fisheries and everyone living nearby. Operating the Whiting refinery under scab labor is a disaster-in-waiting. The situation inside is so bad that some 200 scabs are reported to have quit! But BP continues to roll the dice in its bid to smash the union. These maniacs have no business having any say in safety whatsoever. If the bosses are going to jeopardize lives by locking out the union and running the refinery with scabs, then the union must mobilize to end the threat. They must build mass picket lines that shut production down tight and refuse to return until the union is recognized as the enforcer of safety on the job.

The USW has thousands of members in various industries across Northern Indiana. Other union heavy hitters like the UAW and Teamsters have substantial concentrations of members in the Chicagoland area too. These class allies of the locked-out workers should be encouraged to join the picket lines in order to deter scabs altogether. They have everything to gain from doing so. In the current climate, their own bosses, like those at BP and NIPSCO, are undoubtedly feeling emboldened. If the USW goes down, they will move up on the bosses' hit list. With the war in Iran causing the price of gas and other basic necessities to climb, things are not looking up for working people. A united stand right now in defense of the USW would bolster labor's ability to collectively defend against the bosses' attacks and the chaos they create.

A picket line is a battle line in the class struggle. Let's treat it that way. Despite the USW leadership's refusal to effectively engage in the fights picked by BP and NIPSCO, union members can still salvage the situation by exercising their own form of the same ruthless determination that the bosses are displaying:

- ***Build mass picket lines.*** Workers should form committees to organize beefed-up picket lines and enlist unions throughout Chicagoland and Northern Indiana. Area unions have given fine words of support, but those words must be backed up by bodies on the picket lines. ***An injury to one is an injury to all!***

- ***Establish union control of job safety.*** The only way to protect workers on the job and the communities surrounding these plants is for the union to enforce safety. The greedy bosses will never put safety first.

- ***Organize contract workers who refuse to cross picket lines.*** The company is trying to undermine and weaken the union by expanding the number of contract workers and their job responsibilities. Those who honor our pickets should be brought into the union and join the picket lines, where they can fight to win gains for themselves.

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